EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday 23rd May 2024
Report Subject	School Attendance and Exclusions
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language and Culture
Report Author	Chief Officer Education & Youth
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report provides information regarding the levels of attendance and exclusion across Flintshire schools for the academic year 2022/23. The main reasons cited for pupil absence and exclusion have been included within the report.

The period reported on reflects the second full year following the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of this exceptional event continues to impact on the levels of attendance and exclusion. Schools across Wales continued to re-engage learners and families following the lengthy periods of isolation brought about by the pandemic. Many of the learners have again found it difficult to resume the routine and expectations of school life. This ongoing situation has once again prevented meaningful comparison with the data from years prior to 2020/21 for Flintshire, but it does provide another opportunity to provide some insight into its legacy.

Attendance across Flintshire schools once again remains lower than pre-pandemic levels, with illness accounting for the majority of absences. The levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusion remain on an increasing trend, particularly across the secondary sector. Meetings on a regional and national level suggest that similar trends with regards to attendance and exclusion are evident across other authorities and concerns continue to be flagged to Welsh Government; a national multi-agency group has been established to further consider inform practice in this area. National data releases have now been reinstated by Welsh Government in recent months allowing Local Authorities to obtain some insight into the performance of schools across the whole of Wales.

Services continue to review and develop their operational procedures in response to the need to support an improvement in attendance and overall reduction in

exclusion as per the recommendation from the 2019 Estyn Inspection and the report outlines some of the changes implemented. There is evidence that Flintshire's overall performance has been improving regarding school attendance but that levels of exclusion are continuing to rise.

RECOMMENDATIONS	
1	Members consider the attendance and exclusion data for Flintshire schools and the actions undertaken by officers to support increased engagement and the safety and wellbeing of our children and young people.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	BACKGROUND AND CONSIDERATIONS
1.01	Prior to the pandemic, school attendance and exclusion comparative data had been published by Welsh Government (WG) retrospectively on an annual basis. During the pandemic, data publication and performance measurement was suspended and was constructed utilising Flintshire County Council unverified data extracted from local databases. The data provided thereafter and including the last academic year 2022/23 was taken from PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) which is provided directly from schools each year.
1.02	Table 1 in Appendix 1 provides the overview of pupil attendance across both primary and secondary schools (mainstream and special) for the last 4 academic years. Primary attendance data, whilst below pre-pandemic levels is confirming similar levels of school attendance for the last 2 years. Comparison with national data for 2022-23 indicates that attendance across Flintshire's primary schools is the 5th highest, where the range is between 89.8% and 92.9%. Attendance in secondary schools reduced to below 90% during the pandemic and this situation has remained unchanged for 2022/23. However, overall secondary school attendance was 89% for the year which represented an improvement of 1.3% for 22/23 and is the 3rd highest nationally (range 85.5% - 89.4%).
1.03	Headteachers have the discretion whether to authorise a child's absence or not based on the information provided by the parent/carer. The high levels of authorised absence outlined in Table 3 suggest that parents/carers were continuing in the main, to provide schools with acceptable reasons for absence. It is evident that illness remained the predominant reason for absence across the year in both sectors with this significantly surpassing all other reasons. Holiday absences also increased significantly to 19.61% in the primary sector for 2021/22 as travel restrictions eased. However, the level of absence recorded for holiday

	absence during 2022/23 reduced to 16.86 %, but remains a significant reason for absence in the primary sector.
1.04	Parents/carers are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their children attend school regularly. It is evident that parental attitudes to school attendance have changed, with some not perceiving attendance at school to have the same level of importance as it did pre-pandemic. Headteachers continue to reinforce the overall importance of attendance on pupil engagement and attainment and are implementing a range of strategies to promote and secure attendance in collaboration with Council Services. Many schools have looked to respond proactively to the ongoing attendance challenges and have tried to expand their support and provision offer which has included access to an alternative curriculum offer and offsite provision. The challenging financial climate will impact on the ability of schools to maintain the delivery of such initiatives. A change in the model for Welsh Government grant allocation has seen a redirection of some grant funding directly to secondary schools that had previously been available to support the delivery of central services to support engagement. It is anticipated that this additional funding may assist in the continuation of some aspects of the offer in our schools but the increase in presenting need remains a concern. Maximising collaborative approaches between schools and Council Services, such as Youth Services, to enhance the provision on offer remains a priority. These options have also been utilised to support individuals either at risk of, or those who have been excluded from school. Services are being further enhanced this year by the Community Focused Schools Service which has recently been established following access to WG targeted grant funding in 2022/23.
1.05	Other services across the Education & Youth Portfolio have key roles to play in supporting improved attendance and reducing levels of exclusion. These include the Education Welfare Service (EWS) which has a statutory responsibility about school attendance matters along with other teams such as Additional Learning Needs, Education Psychology, Young Person Counselling, Personal Support, Community Focused Schools, English as an Additional Language and Gypsy/Traveller services which offer specialist support to schools, families, and individual learners to improve their engagement levels. Attendance and exclusion data at both school and individual level is circulated to service managers and reports are also shared once per half term with all Secondary Pastoral Leads at their regular review forum that is organised and led by the Local Authority. This facilitates discussion around the ongoing challenges and the sharing of effective practice.
1.06	A particular focus has been on Year 6/7 transition data for the EWS. A review of the data during 2021/22 suggested that transition from Year 6 to 7 was a potential area of opportunity to assess and engage pupils where attendance had fallen below an 85% threshold in Year 6. After an initial pilot in one of our secondary schools, services have been further

	developed to work directly with pupils that have recorded absence below the WG threshold for persistent absenteeism of 85% (recently increased by WG to 90%). The Community Focused Schools service are developing a group work model to provide in several Flintshire schools specifically focusing on the transition cohort from Year 6 to Year 7 with the aim to intervene proactively and at an early stage. This group will be monitored to see if the revised approach can improve the attendance of this particular cohort during 2023/24.
1.07	In 2021/22, the role of Education Support Officer (ESO) was introduced to the Education Welfare Service with the aim of providing a specific focus on embedding a consistent graduated approach to attendance monitoring across the county. The ESOs within the service support schools in relation to attendance management with the Education Welfare Officers being targeted at more complex cases, including the implementation of court proceedings where necessary.

A model Attendance Policy was shared with all Flintshire Schools and was updated in 2023. This provides schools with an appropriate framework in relation to attendance processes and clarifies roles and responsibilities to support a more consistent approach across the county. These actions appear to have been well received by Headteachers and are supporting the gradual increase in attendance and the pleasing comparisons at a national level as referenced in section 1.02.

The Council has also received additional WG grant funding targeted at expanding the offer from the EWS. Assistant Support Officers have been recruited on a temporary basis in line with the funding and have been targeted at schools where attendance is known to be a challenge and where in some cases, it has been identified as an Estyn recommendation. These officers provide a valuable link between the school and the family, spending a significant part of their day carrying out home visits. This additional activity has had a significant impact in some areas with high levels of challenge and supported a collaborative approach between the Council and the school to secure greater levels of engagement. |
| 1.08 | As part of the broader structure of the EWS, 2 ESOs have also been appointed to provide dedicated support for families that choose Elective Home Education (EHE) to educate their children. This revised approach allows the authority to provide a dedicated point of contact with such families and to utilise additional funding provided by WG to support/safeguard such families in an enhanced manner. The levels of parents deciding to EHE continue to rise in Flintshire. In 2019, there were 95 children who were EHE. This rose to 167 in 2022 and 177 in 2023. This mirrors an increasing national trend.

The largest cohort that became EHE in 2023 were children in year 7, with September being recorded as the month where the largest number of children became EHE. The majority of children who became EHE in 2023 were in years 7 – 9 and overall, the largest percentage of children who |

	were EHE in the year were in year 10. The dedicated officer continues to develop our practice in response to the WG guidance and aims to build positive relationships with children and families who have taken this decision. Families are also supported to re-engage their children in schools where this is felt to be a more suitable option.
1.09	As well as the EHE officer, a dedicated ESO has taken a lead role as Children Missing Education (CME) lead to ensure any pupils that fail to arrive in their school or leave the locality are placed on the central Lost Pupil Database. These service revisions ensure that the Local Authority meets its duty to work with other councils when children leave our schools and to promote safeguarding matters robustly.
1.10	The Education Welfare Service implements the legal challenge to parents/carers on behalf of the Council in collaboration with the FCC Legal Services Department where appropriate/necessary. The full range of legal powers that are usually available to support an improvement in attendance were suspended by Welsh Government during the lockdown period and have only been re-implemented during 2022. Such legal action is only applied in cases where there are significant levels of unauthorised absences and where all interventions have failed to improve the situation. As outlined in Table 1, the levels of unauthorised absence were gradually increasing. However, this trend has reduced in 2022/23 and reduced in both primary and secondary sectors. Whilst the percentages overall remain low, it does indicate that Headteachers are presenting an increasing level of challenge to parents/carers where they feel there is insufficient evidence to support learner absence.
1.11	In response to the increasing level of challenge being applied by some schools the Local Authority Education Welfare Service (EWS) has administered and progressed Fixed Penalty Notice applications from individual Headteachers in accordance with the published FCC Code of Conduct for the school year 2022/23. This process ensures that Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) are delivered by hand and confirms if any payment of the notices has been received. Where payment has not been received and absences remain unauthorised, the cases now progress to court proceedings to ensure that the application of such actions is consistent and conclusive. In 2022/23, 99 fines were issued in a bid to tackle persistent unauthorised absences. Of the 99 FPN, fines were issued. Nearly half were paid within the prescribed time period confirming that these individuals accepted that their children were absent without a satisfactory reason. For those that remained unpaid court action was progressed by the EWS where appropriate with 8 fines of £660 and other disposals being applied by the Magistrates Court. The impact of these initial actions was monitored and Headteachers were made aware of the outcome. Information was also published by the Council in local media outlets as a press release to

	promote awareness of the possible consequences associated with persistent unauthorised absences.
1.12	As stated, the main factor impacting on attendance continues to be illness with mental health issues a concern for learners particularly in the secondary sector. Whilst there is regular engagement with health colleagues to consider the range of services available to Flintshire children and young people, access to appropriate services and intervention remains a challenge. The school medical process to consider cases of persistent absence is available to the EWS, but resource deficits with partner Health Services has placed this system under pressure. The Council's EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) Panel can provide medical home tuition for learners with appropriate medical evidence is available to support this request. Additional targeted support in this area is available from the Progression Team who engage with young people that are isolated from school to ensure that they do not become NEET. Officers have also worked with health colleagues to secure regional grant funding targeted at supporting children with a neurodivergent (ND) profile. An additional teacher has been seconded to straddle education and health with the aim of supporting children on the ND assessment waiting list to maintain their educational placements. The focus across year 6 – 9 to support transition and maintenance of secondary placements. This project is in its infancy but has been well received by both health and educational professionals.
1.13	The level of fixed term and permanent exclusion across our schools had generally been increasing in the period prior 2020. The main reasons cited for exclusion were physical assault against a pupil, verbal/threatening behaviour against an adult, persistent and disruptive behaviour and 'other'. Council services work in partnership with individuals, schools, and families to offer support and intervention to prevent exclusion. The increasing complexity of need and wider contributing factors such as children at risk of exploitation, substance misuse issues and anti-social behaviour continues to make this increasingly difficult. Levels of exclusion in 2022/23 increased with permanent exclusions and occasions of fixed term exclusion over five days in secondary being recorded at a significantly higher level. (See Appendix, Tables 5 and 6).
1.14	The primary reasons for exclusion recorded during the period 2022/23 remained within the categories stated earlier within this report. However, one noticeable increase recorded was in relation to substance related issues. A partnership approach has been developed in such cases to provide support with agencies such as the Drug and Alcohol Service 'Sorted' being key to these interventions. North Wales Police are consulted or engaged as appropriate, but this trend was recognised as a matter that required a revised strategic approach to meet this increasing trend with the locality during 2022/23. In response, the Council's Substance Misuse Policy has been reviewed and is being consulted on with schools to try and

	secure a shared approach on how to respond and ensure that pupils are suitably both reprimanded and supported. The promotion of trauma informed practices remains a priority for the Education & Youth Portfolio to support a greater understanding of the presenting behaviours of some learners and the potential consequences of exclusion. A Trauma Informed Champions group has been established which has representation from secondary schools where this is an agreed priority along with a number of key officers from the Portfolio. This is proving to be a useful forum to consider the challenges around implementing this approach and also sharing effective practice.
1.15	The improvement of attendance and reduction in the levels of exclusion remain as Council priorities. The Senior Learning Advisor for Engagement (SLA) has undertaken a strategic revision of the Engagement services to implement a number of changes to improve both service consistency and accountability. As stated previously, an enhanced approach to data analysis has been implemented to ensure all actions are evidence based and targeted. These practices have become more established into the current academic year and, whilst attendance and exclusion rates remain an area for improvement, there are examples of positive practice against a very challenging backdrop; recent WG data publications also place attendance across Flintshire schools in the upper quartile nationally.
1.16	The importance of creating a sense of belonging is spearheading our overall approach as a Portfolio and will focus our actions in relation to securing an increase in attendance and reduced levels of exclusion. Work has recently been undertaken by all managers across the Portfolio to develop a clear vision, ethos and principles to inform and guide our work in the coming years. Further engagement with schools, children and young people alongside other key stakeholders will be undertaken to support and embed a shared understanding and approach from all.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	The increased level of demand for EOTAS services is placing an increasing financial pressure on the Council. This is currently being funded via a combination of school budgets, grant funding and Council service budgets and has been identified as a budget pressure. There are also a small number of learners for whom more bespoke educational packages are required, either due to the lack of capacity within the specialist sector or the lack of suitable provision to meet their complex needs. The Council has a duty to provide education and this also brings with it an increased level of cost. The development of a range of suitable provision to meet the presenting need has been identified and work is underway to identify the range of options required to meet the presenting need.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	None undertaken as a result of this report.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	There are a number of risks associated with increased levels of disengagement and pupil exclusion, including safeguarding, pupil wellbeing, pupil outcomes and financial expenditure. The increased use of data across services along with the regular monitoring of the Council/Education & Youth Portfolio Business Plan and the annual reports on attendance and exclusion to the Overview and Scrutiny committee will ensure that progress is checked, and action taken to mitigate the identified risks.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 FCC Attendance and Exclusion Data for 2019/20 to 2022/23
5.02	Appendix 2 Attendance Codes

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	WG All Wales Attendance Toolkit WG Guidance - Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units April 2024 **Contact Officer:** John Grant, Senior Learning Adviser - Engagement **Telephone:** 07785695823 **E-mail:** john.grant@flintshire.gov.uk

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	**Authorised absence** - an absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes instances of absence for which a satisfactory explanation has been provided (e.g. illness, family bereavement or religious observance). **Unauthorised absence** - an absence without permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences. **Persistent absenteeism** - absent for at least 20 per cent of the sessions that schools were open to pupils.